Joseph R. Fornieri’s Abraham Lincoln’s Political Faith is a welcome contribution to the field of political theory. It offers a thoughtful examination of Lincoln’s political philosophy, a philosophy founded upon American democratic and religious traditions.

Fornieri states that “Lincoln viewed the politics of the Civil War era in terms of civil theology” and “interpreted the conflict over slavery as a struggle between rival moral justifications of the American regime competing for public authoritativeness” (3). He argues that Lincoln’s “defense of democracy was informed by a transcendent standard. In his view, a legitimate republican government was bound to and limited by the universal moral law revealed by God in the Bible, known through human reason, and promulgated by the Declaration” (5). Fornieri cautions the reader that “Lincoln’s account of the American political order was formulated not as an abstract doctrine but as a concrete historical response to the rival civil theologies or ‘political faiths’ of proslavery theology, popular sovereignty, and radical abolitionism that competed to shape the public mind during the Civil War era” (6). Fornieri characterizes Lincoln’s political thought as “biblical republicanism” because it combined the biblical tradition of Judeo-Christianity with the American republican tradition of self-government. Consequently, divine revelation and reason worked together to recommit the Union to the Declaration of Independence and the end of slavery.

“Lincoln’s biblical republicanism can be analyzed further in terms of four related dimensions: its substance (public opinion); its agent (the cultural elite); its form (biblical republicanism); and its end (liberty and Union)” (13). Fornieri argues that the significance of public opinion in Lincoln’s thought explains why Lincoln found popular sovereignty and proslavery theology “particularly insidious” (15). The cultural elites, including the self-serving proslavery clergy, Stephen A. Douglas, and the imprudent radical abolitionists tried to shape public opinion in ways destructive to free government and the Union which secured it, and so were particularly at fault. Fornieri contends that Lincoln provides an ultimate moral justification for free labor that combines biblical teaching with the republican principle of consent. “In Lincoln’s civil theology, the political teachings of American republicanism are revealed in the Bible and reinforced through natural reason” (20). The final dimension of Lincoln’s biblical republicanism is
the public good which Lincoln associated with the Declaration of Independence and its teaching that a just regime must secure natural rights. “Lincoln’s conception of liberty and Union combined a moral obligation to the Declaration with a legal obligation to the Constitution” (21).

Fornieri is equally critical of modern interpreters who focus on Lincoln’s personal psychological history to understand his politics. Fornieri’s account of Lincoln offers an alternative to Straussian interpretations. He distinguishes himself from Straussian arguments in giving serious consideration to Lincoln’s biblical faith. Fornieri also argues against those southern conservatives, such as M. E. Bradford and Willmoore Kendall, who see in Lincoln a dangerous “millenarian heresy” which “sanctified the state as a sacred object of veneration” (97). Fornieri thus draws together reason, revelation, and republicanism “as related ways of knowing,” which “reinforce one another in illuminating the same moral and political truths” (37). Fornieri makes a convincing argument by carefully analyzing Lincoln’s public and private writings. His thorough analysis of Lincoln’s use of biblical language is one of the most important contributions of his book. He contends that “In sum, Lincoln used biblical language in at least five different ways: (1) theologically to ponder God’s providential role in order and history; (2) civil theologically, as a transcendent rule and measure to judge public life; (3) evocatively, for stylistic purposes and rhetorical emphasis; (4) allegorically, to clarify or didactically to convey a respective political teaching by means of biblical illustrations; (5) and existentially, as a meditative unfolding of his personal experience of biblical faith” (38). Thereby, those interpretations which fail to note the various uses of biblical language are distorted. For example, the Straussian account of Lincoln’s use of biblical writings reduces it to only civil theology. Similarly, the failure to note Lincoln’s prudence and use of foundational American documents leads to the distortion of the southern conservatives who make Lincoln an idealistic crusader. “While Lincoln may have viewed the Bible as the preeminent source of wisdom... he clearly did not view it as the sole and exclusive source of moral guidance in politics” (35). “Lincoln envisioned a harmony between faith and reason that mutually confirmed the authoritativeness of the nation’s founding creed,” the Declaration of Independence (36). Fornieri draws comparisons between Lincoln, Washington, and Jefferson showing Lincoln’s continuation and extension of the founders’ republican principles.

Fornieri also offers a convincing challenge to those who focus on the Lyceum Address of 1838 as a reflection of Lincoln’s civil
theology. He argues that “the Peoria Address of 1854 represents the most mature and profound expression of Lincoln’s biblical republicanism” (104). Similarly, he offers a different perspective on Lincoln’s Springfield law partner, William Herndon. Fornieri puts Herndon’s statements regarding Lincoln’s religious belief in context. “In sum, Herndon ‘was driven to overstatement’ by the apotheosis of Lincoln and by hagiographers who sought to baptize the president as a member of their congregation” (53). Fornieri offers us a fresh look at old ground which provides a more coherent understanding of the political philosophy of Abraham Lincoln.

Joseph R. Fornieri has given us a thoughtful and well argued account of Lincoln’s political faith that should enhance conversations about religion and politics.

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Absorbing Wesley J. Smith’s Forced Exit: The Slippery Slope from Assisted Suicide to Legalized Murder is an education, accessible to professionals and laypersons, in the facts of the current legal battle surrounding physician assisted suicide (PAS) and euthanasia. Before turning to Smith’s argument, a list of the highlights could be helpful to a prospective reader:

• The legal history and current situation in Holland, which is the most strident pro-euthanasia country in the world (Chapter 4).

• An easy to follow account of the highly successful euthanasia movement in pre-war Germany and how it facilitated the move to the concentration camps (84-97).